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Let's Set Aside Differences – Not Just During This Season, But All Year

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Let's Set Aside Differences – Not Just During This Season, But All Year

By Erin O'Flaherty

UCF Forum columnist

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'Tis the season, the season of giving—whether giving thanks, praises, spare change, an extra tip or bonus. You name it, and it's officially “the season” for it.

For me, the beginning of “the season” is evidenced by the conversion of one of my pre-set radio stations to play Christmas and holiday tunes on a loop. The evidence on my Facebook newsfeed is also a giveaway, noticing that since Nov. 1 everyone is declaring what he or she is thankful for every day.

Ironic to me, though, are the comments of users who start being thankful on Nov. 1 and then post an update on Nov. 5 with “I forgot to be thankful the past four days so here are five things I'm thankful for all at once.”

At first I thought, “Aw, that is so sweet,” but that quickly changed to “I'm sorry, but *really?*” Come on now, it's the season! While I love to read what others are thankful for and personally keep up with their thanks on social media, I just wish it weren't a huge declaration or movement when they decide to pause to be thankful for what I hope they are also doing every other month of the year.

When people “forget” to be thankful, not just in November, it's kind of sad.

So, what does “'Tis the Season” mean, anyway? Does it mean a special red cup at Starbucks, or a Thanksgiving sub from Publix, declaring your thanks via social media, or a random act of kindness by paying for the person behind you in line? It seems that's what it has become, but I think it's more than that.

Now, I certainly appreciate and value the sentiment behind the holidays. People bustle with excitement, generosity, and the hope of a fresh start come the New Year. Sometimes, though, I just wonder why everyone seems to become friendlier as the

holidays approach. I say “the holidays” because it means something different to everyone.

Yet, in a country where we are afforded many freedoms but still struggle with social discord among an array of controversial issues, in these last two months of the year the holidays symbolizing something different to everyone seem to often be forgotten. We tend to be blind to those who are different than us, and instead of alienating them, we offer our generosity and warm personalities.

It creates a sense of peace...it creates a certain social climate. A season, I might say.

Many celebrate Thanksgiving, Christmas, Hanukkah, Kwanzaa and other holidays – some in a religious sense, while others do not. Ten months out of the year, these differences in what the holidays mean would drive us crazy and create an immense amount of friction among our subcultures. Ten months out of the year, we find it extremely hard to accept why someone might celebrate differently from us, and even wonder if their moral compass is pointed in the right direction, without ever questioning our own.

If we are able to look past differences during “the season,” to come together and be our most accepting and giving selves to spread a shared sense of peace and excitement among all, why does that have to change with the start of a new year?

My message today is concise. On Jan. 1, we will be focused on our resolutions, hoping to become improved versions of ourselves during the next 12 months. Sadly, as the hope of “the season” fades, many of these resolutions will fail. The year will get in the way. It will become busy and messy, just as it was before the pumpkin spice lattes and Black Friday deals. We will begin to make excuses.

But folks, I’ve seen what we can do when we come together and forget differences. We are actually nice to each other. We listen.

In the two months of the year that I feel the change in spirits, I actually like talking to strangers. They are different from the strangers that I meet January through October.

So, I have just one request. After celebrating “the season” in whatever capacity you choose, when your heart and spirit are most full, resolve not merely to work out more, to spend less money, or in my case, rescue fewer cats (because we all know that will fail).

Instead, pick something that could last: Resolve to simply *be a better stranger*.

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